Fringe-ology: How I Tried to Explain Away the Unexplainable—And Couldn't by Steve Volk. New York: Harper One, 2011. 312 pp. $25.99 (hardcover). $15.99 (paperback, 2012). ISBN 9780061857713.

It was a summer night, almost 20 years ago, when my father-in-law had his one and only paranormal experience. It still haunts him though. And even though he's told himself countless times that it was a dream, just a dream, he's never quite been able to convince himself of that.

He was sleeping away the dark night hours of June, at his tidy ranch home in California's San Joaquin Valley, when suddenly he startled awake, sitting up in bed so abruptly that he woke his wife. "What?" she said. "What is it?"

"Dan's here," he replied, referring to a cousin who lived a few hundred miles away. "He's calling my name." They both sat there in the country silence. Not a sound, not a call. Just a dream, she said, and they returned to their pillows. But a few minutes later, he was up again. The voice was closer.

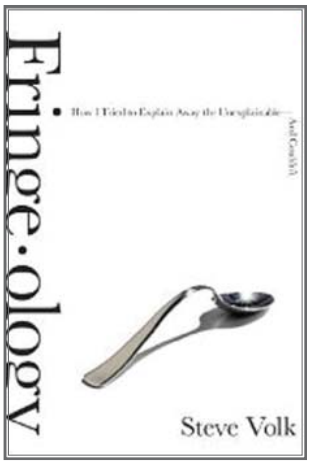
"Dan's outside," he said. "I'll go find him." And he was up, pulling open the sliding doors that opened from bedroom to patio, searching for his cousin, startling some sleepy birds into flight. But only the birds stirred, maybe a few leaves fluttered, nothing else.

He returned to bed, wondering—as we tend to do—if something he'd eaten, something spicy, twisted up his dreams. But he was almost relieved to be up with daylight. And he was still fighting that odd anxiety when his cousin Dan's son called to tell him his father was dead. Dan had shot himself to death during those exact minutes that my father-in-law had heard his cousin calling in the dark.

I'm telling you this story because it leads directly into why I like Steve Volk's book *Fringe-ology* so much. Of course, it helps that it's just a really good book: smart, incisive, funny, readable. But, more than that, it captures what an entirely human experience we're talking about—this exploration of our natural world, this journey in which we try to make sense of the fantastical universe that we inhabit, this patchworked understanding built of both our doubts and our beliefs.

"In the coming pages," Volk says in his Introduction,

> I write about near-death experiences (NDEs), mental telepathy, quantum consciousness, UFOs, a mystic astronaut, ghost hunting, and a pair of scientists doing their level best to study aspects of human experience often derided as paranormal. But this book is about more than any of these things. This book is about us. (p. 4)



And, thus, while I start by telling you a personal story, Volk weaves through the book an inquiry into his own childhood experience of living in a house apparently haunted by thumps and creaks and bumps in the night. In fact, each chapter in the book is framed by an individual's encounter with the paranormal, from dedicated investigators to everyday citizens caught up in inexplicable events.

One of my favorite chapters focuses on the question of UFOs, beginning and ending with a rather shy man from a small Texas town who in 2008 found himself standing under a rather spectacular and still unidentified flying object, a chain-link of lights in the sky. "I think I saw something that I shouldn't have seen," the man near tears tells his local police officer (p. 113).

And from this perspective, Volk opens an exploration of the event itself—seen by a startling large number of residents in the Texas community of Stephenville, their shock and uncertainty in the face of a media frenzy, government mismanagement (at best) of the response, and cultural attitudes toward such Spielberg-like close encounters. The word *attitudes* is mine here; Volk characterizes it more as combat between skeptics and believers.

In general, throughout the book, he portrays believers a little more gently than skeptics. That's not to say that he doesn't provide some excellent examples of psychic scam work. And that's not to say that Volk himself can be called a believer in the classic sense. He maintains a kind of journalistic distance from his subjects, testing his ideas, weighing and balancing them.

But he has more sympathy, I think, for the willingness to consider possibilities than for determined denial of those things that lie outside the scientific rulebook. And he makes an eloquent point of the fact that scientific believers and well-known skeptics are also capable of devious behavior. He elegantly makes this point in the case of the well-known magician-turned-debunker James Randi, providing examples of times when Randi has apparently altered facts to strengthen his points. "It seems to be that any truly rational group would not have James Randi as a member," Volk notes (p. 73).

Fringe-ology is not, though, a judgmental book. Most of his people studies are of those trying to make sense of what they've seen or heard or even done. He looks at near-death encounters through the often troubled story of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, at the fascinating subject of lucid dreaming

through both the research and the workshops run by researcher Stephen LaBerge, at the path that led Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell to found the Institute for Noetic Sciences with its focus on science and spirituality.

Volk neatly connects all these different tales into the fabric of his story, each person, each inquiry adding to his exploration of what's real and what's not and whether we will ever fully define the difference. In the end, he argues against entirely rigid definitions of reality, and for finding a comfort level with uncertainty. And he argues—with real success—that allowing for uncertainty lets us find a better understanding. "The question," Volk says, "is whether or not we're prepared to accept a world in which science and spirituality really do serve each other" (p. 264).

Which brings me back to my father-in-law's story of the voice in the night. People hearing that tale have assured him that it was, indeed, his cousin saying goodbye. And other people hearing that tale have assured him that it was just a coincidental dream. When I've repeated the story to my more skeptical friends, they've pointed out that we probably have many dreams involving friends and family that we just don't remember, that the circumstances of this one vaulted it into unforgettable territory.

But I find myself shaking my head when they tell me that. My father-in-law is such a grounded personality, such a natural skeptic. Yet this, he says, was like no dream he ever had. We don't have the scientific method at this point to prove it was a dream—or to prove it wasn't. And until we learn how to do that, I find myself on Steve Volk's side, willing to allow for possibility. If nothing else, it makes our uncertain universe a more interesting place.

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